

AESTHETIC PARTICIPATION AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Arnold Berleant

While the environment has become a popular topic in many circles--conservation, legislative, community, and international, to name a few, it has not often been the subject of a broadly reflective inquiry into its philosophical meaning and significance. Indeed, in the flurry of attention toward the environment, one crucial aspect of the subject has often been either disregarded, circumscribed, or trivialized: the aesthetic. Aesthetic experience here is more than the appreciation of beautiful gardens, parks, or urban vistas. It is more than neighborhood cleanup campaigns and the removal or masking of junkyards. It has to do with the very form and quality of human experience in general. And the environment can be seen as the larger setting in which all such experience occurs, the setting in which the aesthetic becomes the qualitative center of our daily lives. I should like to consider such ideas as these here.

Now ideas are important. Not only do they express our understanding of the subject; they formulate and clarify that understanding. Still more, ideas generate and guide action, and nowhere are thoughtful understanding and guidance more important than in environmental experience, for the aesthetic aspect plays a crucial part in our perception of environment. While accounts of aesthetic experience have appeared in many forms since the rise of modern aesthetics in the eighteenth century, they may be cast into a small number of basic types. I want to identify and examine here three models of such experience with an eye to considering their significance for the aesthetic perception of environment, in particular the urban environment.

The contemplative model of aesthetic experience is so securely established as to assume the status of an official doctrine. Resting on a philosophical tradition that extends back to classical times, it appears to many to be the very foundation of modern aesthetics, axiomatic and unchallengeable. First formulated in the eighteenth century in the writings of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and others, the doctrine emerged that identifies the art object as separate and distinct from that which surrounds it, isolated from the rest of life. Such an object requires a special attitude for its appreciation, an aesthetic attitude characterized by a disinterestedness that regards that object in the light of its own intrinsic qualities with no concern for ulterior purposes. Stolnitz sums up two centuries of discussion when he defines the aesthetic attitude as "disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone."^[1]

When this doctrine of separation and distance is applied to environmental experience, it implies a conception of space modeled on the space of the physicist, more specifically the eighteenth century physicist. Space here becomes an abstraction, a medium that is universal, objective, and impersonal. Such an objective space leads to the objectification of things. Objects are considered to be situated in space and to move independently through it, and they are to be

regarded from the stance of an impersonal observer. What is common to environments that assume this notion of objective space is the design or depiction of a scene as if it were viewed from some vantage point, with the observer being removed and contemplating it only from a distance. The typical definition of a landscape exhibits this doctrine clearly when it is taken as "an expanse of natural scenery seen by the eye in one view." [2]

This contemplative model has dominated thinking in architectural and urban design since that time. Its influence extends from the monumental public building of classical design set in solitary splendor atop the pedestal of a broad staircase, to the urban panorama viewed from the isolated vantage point of an observation platform. It is found in the formal order of the Italian or French garden and the grid arrangement of city streets. The urban environment has thus been treated unquestioningly as if it were composed of isolated objects organized by a rational, disengaged mind.

There have been attempts since the eighteenth century to develop alternatives to the classical model of aesthetic experience. These offer to overcome the passivity and separation of the standard theory by depicting the aesthetic perceiver more as a multi-sensory and active agent than through the disengaged vision of the traditional position. Such inclusive accounts offer a more promising direction for this discussion and have been developed in various ways, two of which I shall consider here.

Let me call the first the active model. Versions of this may be found in the aesthetics of pragmatism, especially in Dewey's *Art as Experience*, and in the phenomenological aesthetics of Merleau-Ponty and others. What is common to the various forms of the active model is the recognition that the objective world of classical science is not the world experienced by the human perceiver. Thus there is a sharp difference to be drawn between space, as it is presumably held to be actually and objectively, and the perception of that space. Now aesthetics was a term originally meaning perception by the senses and was adopted later to represent the discipline of sensuous knowledge devoted to beauty. It is fitting, then, to insist that a theory of aesthetic experience derive from perception rather than objectivity, from the manner in which we engage in spatial experience rather than from the way in which we objectify and conceptualize such experience. Dewey, for example, maintains that art stirs into activity those inherent dispositions to an intimate relation to the surroundings that the human being has acquired through his evolutionary and cultural development. [3] In this portrayal of the experience of art the organism is an activator of the environment. Perception is not purely visual but rather somatic: it is the body that energizes space. From walking down a corridor or a street to operating an elevator or an automobile, much of our setting depends someone to exert himself in and upon it.

For the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, as well, perception starts with the body. The presence of the body as here is the primary reference point from which all spatial coordinates must be derived. Thus the perceived object is grasped in relation to the space of the perceiver, whether he be at rest or in motion. "It is...a space reckoned starting from me as the zero point or degree zero of spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live in it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me." [4] The phenomenological notion of the lived-body develops this sense of lived-space further. It takes

the body as the vital center of our spatial experience. From the body we view existential space, determine its directional axes, and measure existential distance.[5] To conceive the spatiality of the lived body is to recognize that places and movements are perceived in relation to the body, seen as here or there. Thus the discernment of places with their value and meanings occurs in relation to the central position of the body.

Yet important as these ideas are, they are not enough. Environment is not wholly dependent on the perceiving subject; it also imposes itself in significant ways on the human person, engaging one in a relationship of mutual influence. Not only is it impossible to objectify the environment: we cannot take the environment merely as a reflection of or response to an active perceiver. There are particular features in the environment that impose themselves on the perceiver, and recognizing this makes it necessary to extend the active model of aesthetic experience to include these factors. The consciousness of self, of the lived body, and of lived space must be complemented by recognizing that the environment exerts influences on the body, that it contributes to shaping the body's spatial sense and mobility and ultimately to the definition of its lived space. This leads us to consider a different conception of aesthetic experience. In this view the environment is understood as a field of forces continuous with the organism, a field in which there is a reciprocal action of organism on environment and environment on organism and in which there is no real demarcation between them. I should like to offer, then, yet a third pattern for aesthetic experience, the participatory model, which is the most significant for understanding the environment, especially the designed environment. Let me develop its traits and illustrate how it functions.

It is perhaps easier to understand the forces that emanate from the body as it thrusts itself into the environment than it is to grasp the magnetism of environmental configurations as they exert a subtle influence on the body. We sense our own vitality more directly than we apprehend the action of spaces and masses. Yet the body and the environment extend mutually interacting fields of force, and what distinguishes the participatory model of aesthetic experience from the active model is its recognition of the way in which environmental features reach out to affect and respond to the perceiver. This phenomenon is not new: artists and architects have long utilized it. What has been missing, however, is a theoretical formulation of such environmental activity within the frame of an aesthetic theory. Such a statement cannot only help us to recognize and understand those designs that may, without conscious intent, exhibit this model; it can, more importantly, help in the conscious direction of urban planning and design. Moreover, I believe that the participatory model is no special case, an exception to the prevalent observational mode in aesthetics that is required by the unique conditions of environmental experience. It is rather a model that can be applied successfully to other, indeed, all modes of art in the form of a general theory of aesthetic experience.

My purpose here, however, is more limited. It is to take this participatory model and show how it reveals certain environmental features most tellingly. These are features that possess what I term reciprocity as they function in our aesthetic experience of the environment. This reciprocity goes beyond the notion of invitational qualities suggested first by Lewin's field theory of psychological motivation.[6] It urges us to recognize the ways in which environmental features impose themselves on the perceiver and thus function in a reciprocal fashion, as

perceiver energizes environment and environment reaches out to act upon the perceiver in a mutually interrelated and continuous way. Certainly not all environments are participatory. Many are neutral and respond only to activity generated by people and imposed by them on their surroundings. Indeed some environments clearly discourage action or response. Yet those that are participatory are hospitable and offer welcome and warmth to those who inhabit them. Let me support this by considering some environmental traits that can work with the perceiver.

Perhaps the most apparent of these features is the path. Paths, of course, are especially rich in significance. They are not experienced as cognitive symbols but, if one insists on using that concept, as living symbols that embody their meaning, symbols that lead us into action, make us commit our bodies to choices. What is most striking about paths is the way in which they can attract us. The pedestrian streets of Venice are a well known instance of paths that lead us onward, but this quality is common in towns and cities whose streets originated as foot trails. Other medieval examples include the path atop the city walls of Dubrovnik and La Grande rue in Geneva, but parks like San Antonio's Riverwalk, preserves, and even college campuses often have paths and trails that exert a similar attraction on the walker. In describing the hiking path, for example, Bollnow comments that "the path does not shoot for a destination but rests in itself. It invites loitering. Here a man is in the landscape, taken up and dissolved into it, a part of it. He must have time when he abandons himself to such a path. He must stop to enjoy the view." [7] Roads, like paths, act upon us in diverse ways, inviting us to move down them or putting us off. This is why customary routes are often unidirectional, more appealing in one direction than in the other, so that on a routine trip we are likely to follow one course going and a different one returning. Similarly, the habitual behavior with which we follow a customary route may be explained as the largely unattended attraction of environmental cues that act upon us to lead us regularly in the same direction.

Places, plaza, parks, and gardens may be inviting or discouraging in much the same manner. Participatory spaces encourage entry; they evoke our interest and draw us in. Instead putting one off or offering a harmonious formal array that appeals through its orderliness when viewed from a distance, there may be comfortable irregularity and disorder. Great open spaces are divided into smaller protective ones, and enclosure replaces exposure, providing an easy habitation for the body. The main plaza in the Colombian town of Giron is home to a great spreading tree, offering shade and shelter from the blinding sun and space. A pedestrian mall in Sacramento breaks up the rectangular space between large apartment buildings with plantings, walks, lampposts, and benches. And of course the unique Piazza san Marco fills an enormous cavity with a geometrically designed pavement on which are scattered pigeons, people, cafe chairs, the Campanile, and the columns of the Lion of St. Mark and St. Theodore, all surrounded by the articulated surface of the Renaissance facades. These instances are sharply different from the monumental forms and intimidating spaces of such places as the federal area in Washington, City Hall Plaza in Boston, and Brasilia that diminish and swallow the body. [8]

Buildings can also offer opportunities for participation, and when they do they contrast markedly with the usual treatment of architectural structures as visual objects. Visual buildings may display a symmetrical structure. They may stand apart as a monumental object. They may be primarily a facade whose third dimension is an incidental and unrelated appendage, or they

may devolve into pure surface, as in the curtain-wall skyscraper .[9] Yet again buildings may confront us with solid, opposing planes in which an insignificant opening for access is the only imperfection. In contrast, buildings that encourage participation possess human scale. They are not isolated objects that oppose the perceiver. Instead they are a part of the landscape that evokes our active interest by reaching out to us with embracing configurations that welcome our approach and invite access. Buildings of the first type are the commonplace product of the quest for glory or efficiency. Those of the second are far less frequent but include such outstanding examples as the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto and the Calgary, Alberta airport.

Yet nowhere is this invitation to participate more pronounced than in the case of entrances, doorways, and stairs. These can put one off or lead one on, and in ways that may be subtle or obvious. An effective entrance or doorway draws a person in instead of stopping movement through awe or confusion. It does not erect obstacles to be overcome or ambiguous shapes to be identified, nor does it present intimidating or insignificant ways of passing into a place or a building. Rather, a participatory entrance is easily and clearly recognized; it is appropriate to the body, inclusionary in its perceptual character, welcoming in its affective qualities. So, too, can a staircase invite ascent, pulling the body upward through its own rising movement. A visual staircase becomes a pedestal to support an imposing structure; a participatory staircase beckons us to climb.

I have developed particular environmental features to illustrate environmental participation, for such traits are most common and most apparent to us. Total participatory environments are relatively rare in the modern built environment. One thinks, perhaps romantically, of the New England farmstead, embraced among surrounding hills, with house and outbuildings seeming to emerge out of the landscape and to be a part of it, and whose roads and paths follow the contours of the land and show the signs of the use from which they have resulted. Here is the reciprocity of man and nature made visible. Sometimes a modern highway will achieve the same harmony with the landscape. The Taconic State Parkway north of New York City is one outstanding example, where a divided highway moves through the hills of farm and woodland, shaping its path to the rising and falling terrain. At the same time as the road responds to the land, the driver responds to the road, for the Taconic guides us forward and leads us on, offering a constantly changing rural panorama to the active perceiver. Urban examples are more difficult to come by and most are flawed. Perhaps the most famous and successful of all is the Piazza San Marco in Venice, where the presence of people is needed to complete the space that is defined by the surrounding palaces and church, and where the Renaissance facades and arcades offer shade, interest, and hospitality. To view the Piazza uninhabited in the early morning from the upper level of the church is to see it not just unfilled but unfulfilled. One recent example of a built environment that is rather successful from the standpoint of a participatory aesthetic is the Academic Podium at the State University of New York at Albany, designed on the highest rise of the campus by Edward Durrell Stone. Here a two level quadrangle houses administrative offices, student center, classrooms, and an art gallery and surrounds a fountain, a pool, and a lofty column. Work and delectation are joined by staircases, shaded arcades, places to sit, to stand and look, to sun, and to wade (which is not allowed!) in a sheltered space that is still open on one side to the surrounding space and a view of the distant hills. Man, nature, structure, and space fuse here into a harmonious unity.[10]

The recognition of participatory traits requires us to re-think what we mean by environment. The etymology of the term notwithstanding, the experience of environment is not the perception of a foreign territory surrounding the self. It is rather the fluid medium in which we exist, of which our being partakes and comes to identity, not unlike what a body of water is to the fish that inhabits it. Within this environmental medium occur the activating forces of mind, eye, and hand, together with the perceptual features that lie beyond the body, features that engage these forces and elicit their reaction. Every vestige of dualism here must be cast off. There is no inside and outside, no human being and external world, even, in the final reckoning, no self and other. The conscious body moving within and as part of a spatio-temporal environmental medium becomes the domain of human experience, the human world, the ground of human reality within which all discriminations and distinctions must be made. We live, then, in a dynamic nexus of spaces which can speak to us and to which we belong. Marcel urges us to say not that I have a body but that I am my body. Perhaps we can say, in like manner, not that I live in my environment but that I am my environment. The room, the building, the plaza require people to complete them and people require such places for their own fulfillment.

Thus the environment is a perceptual-cultural system that embraces person and place. The features of the world we fashion can create such a condition of harmony or they can discourage it, leading to separation and ultimately to alienation. This is a problem that is particularly acute in the modern industrial environment, where the demands of the economy and of production regularly and with little conscious decision take precedence over people and are imposed on them. Indeed it may be that the absence of places which speak to us and to which we belong may be the most egregious failure of mass industrial society. Because the sense of human place is so often lacking, with roof and hearth we wander yet homeless and unwarmed.

A participatory model of experience thus provides a key to environmental understanding. It enables us to grasp the environment as a setting of dynamic powers, a field of forces that engage both perceiver and perceived in an experiential unity. What is important are not physical traits but perceptual ones, not how things are but how they are experienced. In such a phenomenological field the environment cannot be objectified; rather it is a totality continuous with the participant. An environment can be designed to work in this mode or it can be structured to oppose it. It can be shaped to encourage participation or to inhibit, intimidate, or oppress the person. When design becomes humane it not only fits the shape, movements and uses of the body: It also works with the conscious organism in an arc of expansion, development, and fulfillment. This is a goal which a consciously articulated aesthetic of the sort I have begun here can help the architect, designer, or planner to accomplish. And such an aesthetic can be a powerful force in the effort to transform the world we inhabit into a place for human dwelling.

An earlier version of this paper was given at the Environmental Design Research Association meeting, EDRA 15, San Luis Obispo, California in July 1984 and recorded in the proceedings of that conference. [This paper draws on previously used material, incl. Phenom. Aes. of Env.]

- 1 Stolnitz, Jerome. Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1960), p.35.
 - 2 Webster's New World Dictionary (Cleveland and New York: World, 1959) College Edition, p.820.
 - 3 Dewey, John. Art as Experience (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), pp. 29, 58.
 - 4 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. The Primacy of Perception (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.178.
 - 5 Schrag, Calvin O. Experience and Being (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p.136.
 - 6 Lewin, Kurt. Principles of Topological Psychology (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936), p.205. Cf. also Robert W. Leeper. Lewin's Topological and Vector Psychology, (Eugene, Oregon, 1943), pp.14, 35-37, 63-65.
 - 7 Bollnow, O. F. "Lived-Space," in Philosophy Today, 1961.
 - 8 Steel, Fritz. The Sense of Place (Boston: CBI Publ., 1981), p.187.
 - 9 Yudell, Robert J. "Body Movement," in K. C. Bloomer and C. W. Moore. Body, Memory and Architecture (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977).
 - 10 (Cf.) Berleant, Arnold. "Aesthetic Paradigms for an Urban Ecology," in Diogenes, 103 (Fall 1978), 1-28.
- hn. Art as Experience (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), pp. 29, 58